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## Building Networking Skills as Part of a Fashion Internship Course

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Networking has been identified as one of the critical components in career exploration and professional development (Paulins, 2005). Researchers have emphasized the importance of networking referring to the prevailing wisdom, which suggested that 70-80% of professional jobs are acquired through effective and consistent networking (Kross-Feder, 1999). De Janasz and Forret (2008) commented that many students lack knowledge and skills for effective networking. A networking assignment was developed and implemented as part of a fashion merchandising and apparel design internship course. The assignment could be replicated at any university that offers internships as a part of the curriculum. The purpose of this abstract is to highlight the assignment strategies used to stimulate networking, assess the assignment, and to make suggestions for further incorporation of a similar assignment in experiential, internship courses.

**Implementing the strategy:** The primary objective of the networking assignment was to help students recognize the potential opportunities of developing professional relationships with like-minded business individuals. There were three parts of the assignment. 1) Students created a personal business card. It was suggested that students use templates provided from software programs including Microsoft word or Adobe Illustrator. They were instructed to include basic contact information, typically their name, address, phone number, and email address. They were also reminded of how to format a standard size business card and to not include current internship information. 2) Students collected 20 business cards from professionals they encountered while participating in their internship. The students were instructed to write a connection sentence on the back of each business card referring some memorable qualities of the person they received the card from for future reference. It was suggested that students gather cards from fashion industry professionals, however they were reminded that any professional connections would be helpful in future employment endeavors. In conjunction with the business card collecting, students were instructed to scan the cards. They were required to contact the professionals by email, mentioning their appreciation of meeting that person. 3) Students were then asked to attend at least two networking opportunities/events, such a lunch, fashion show, or a buying trip. Students were asked to document the event by creating a scrap page (collage of related items from the event, such as ticket stubs, pictures, text, etc.).

**Assessing the strategy:** The assignment was incorporated in fashion merchandising and apparel design internship courses that were taken by students enrolled in a mid-sized Midwestern university. It was implemented in 15 course sections distributed among five instructors with two to five students per section. The assignment was assessed as follows. 1) From the completed assignments, the student business cards and networking e-mails were examined for quality. Instructor comments were also analyzed. A content analysis of the business cards collected by students noted the business type, the business location, and the position. The event attended for

the third section of the assignment was documented. 2) Students were also contacted by e-mail to answer four questions about the assignment effectiveness, applicability of the assignment in the internship setting, and potential future use of assignment information. 3) A group discussion was completed among four of the internship instructors about the assignment benefits and drawbacks.

**Effectiveness of strategy in fostering desired outcomes:** After examining 26 assignments, the primary issue noted in instructor comments was missing or incomplete sections. The content and format of the student business cards and the networking e-mails met assessed quality standards. The profession of the individuals on the business cards collected varied with the majority working in retail (n=158; 47%), and in many locations with New York City the only location found in over 20% (n=67). Director /Managers were the most common profession (n=43; 11.8%) stated on the collected cards. The events attended for the assignment varied greatly with little similarity in event types. These events included charity events, fashion shows, a corporate walk through, an intern panel, an interview, a bowling league, and concerts. Students (n=10; 60%) who responded to the survey about the assignment said the assignment was helpful, while 20% did not. A student said "It was a great assignment...it pushed me out of my comfort zone and helped me learn how to network, something that is critical in the fashion industry." The students raised several issues related to the components of the assignment: 40% thought collecting 20 business cards was excessive. Eight (80%) had difficulty finding networking opportunities. Some students felt that sending thank you e-mails was unnecessary. Four (40%) had problems with the assignment requirement, such as finding a scanner to record collected business cards. Four (40%) students felt there was insufficient time to complete the assignment. Nevertheless most felt the information gained would be useful in the future: 70% for future references or resources, 50% for job opportunities, 20% for future internships, and 10% found friendship. The discussion with the instructors confirmed the above findings.

**Plans for continuation, revision, and follow-up:** The assignment will continue to be used because it prompted networking with a variety of professionals in many regions. However, revisions will be made. To increase the completion of the assignment, it will be introduced earlier in the internship course, and the number of business cards collected will be reduced to 10. Information about finding networking opportunities will be provided, such as 99events.com that has listings of events by category nationwide. The business card information will be documented on a spread sheet rather than scanning. The students will be reminded that etiquette, as in job interviews, suggests thank you notes, even if by e-mail, for courtesy to contacts and to reinforce the meeting in the memory of the business contact.

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